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ABSTRACT

Pointing out that increasing questions about and attacks on various methods used in teaching English language arts led to a 1994 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Resolution on the right to teach (reaffirmed in 1996) calling for the identification, definition, and defense of methods most often attacked, this brochure is the result of an NCTE committee's work to implement the resolution. The brochure begins with a position statement and then lists 11 strategies for heading off objections to the use of various methodologies and ways of responding when objections come. It is then divided into the following sections: The Teaching and Learning of Written Expression; The Teaching and Learning of Oral Expression; The Teaching and Learning of Reading; The Teaching and Learning of Literature; The Teaching of Grammar, Spelling, Mechanics, and Usage; The Teaching and Learning of Nonprint Media; and Collaborative/Cooperative Learning in the English Language Arts Program. Each section consists of a brief description of the area of controversy; a list of specific objections; responses to those objections; a summary; and a "Suggested Readings" list. (NKA)

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National Council of Teachers of English,
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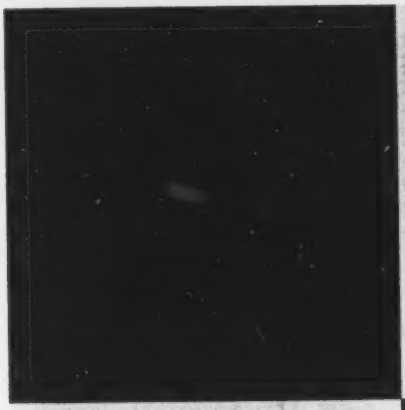
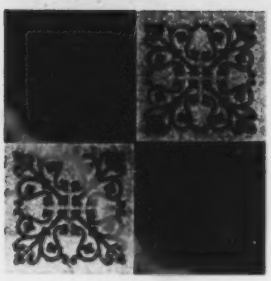
# Defining and Defending Instructional Methods



Prepared by the

SLATE/Standing Committee Against Censorship

Joint Committee on Guidelines for Selection of Instructional Methods



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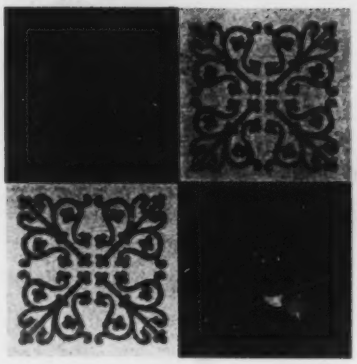

# Defining and Defending Instructional Methods

The National Council of Teachers of English has long been involved in combating censorship and promoting intellectual freedom. Documents have been developed on the students' right to read, dealing with censorship of nonprint materials, as well as guidelines for selection of materials in English language arts programs.

The main emphasis in those documents has been on selection and retention of materials. Increasing questions about and attacks on various *methods* used in teaching English language arts led to a 1994 NCTE Resolution on the right to teach (reaffirmed in a 1996 resolution) calling for the identification, definition, and defense of methods which are most often attacked. A joint subcommittee of the NCTE/SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) and the NCTE Standing Committee Against Censorship was formed to develop a document to implement that resolution. This brochure is the result of that committee's work. Teachers are urged to make use of this document at the departmental, building, and district levels. No permissions are required to photocopy and distribute this document.

If students are to receive high quality instruction, it is essential that teachers have the freedom to select appropriate methods for teaching. The following are some strategies for heading off objections to the use of various methodologies and ways of responding when objections come:

- Proactively involve the community beyond the school.
- Distribute SLATE *Starter Sheets* (see "Suggested Reading" lists for each section below) to faculty members, principals, textbook committees, parent groups, curriculum directors, boards of education, and other interested parties.
- Have informational meetings with interested individuals.
- When criticisms arise in newspapers and magazines, respond from the perspective of the English language arts teacher, remaining open and communicative.
- Avoid an argumentative stance if possible.
- Work to influence the use of effective methods in your school's English program.
- Regularly review methods to determine their effectiveness.
- Keep the door as open as possible with all members of your community, even those which may first appear to be adversaries. With good supporting evidence, you may be able to win them over.
- Develop policies and procedures for selecting appropriate methodologies and specific ways of dealing with complaints when they come.
- Insist that complaints be specific and in writing; then deal with those specifics instead of attempting a general defense.
- Arrange for interested parents to visit classes to see what is actually going on.

Attitudes and practices such as these can go a long way toward setting an atmosphere of openness and trust among teachers, students, parents, and the general public. Nevertheless, protests of teaching methods often arise despite earnest efforts at keeping the lines of communication open. Seven areas in which challenges of methods frequently occur are treated below—namely, writing, oral language, reading, literature, grammar/mechanics/usage, nonprint media, and collaborative/cooperative learning.

Each section consists of a brief description of the area of controversy; a list of specific objections; responses to those objections; a summary and a "Suggested Readings" list. The readings are highly



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selective, focusing mainly on positive approaches to instruction in the controversial area. Also, some key scholarly works that deal directly with the area (e.g., Rosenblatt on literature, Hillocks on grammar and composition) are listed. All of the works are available through NCTE.

## 1 The Teaching and Learning of Written Expression

Journals, free writing, and personal narratives are effective teaching strategies for developing students' written expression. These student-centered strategies typically encourage a free flow of ideas and feelings. They help students to identify their individual voices and often initiate the writing process, setting the stage for authentic writing in more structured forms such as essays or short stories.

Although learning to write requires writing, that act of writing does not of itself teach writing. Writing in conjunction with discussion, criticism, and revision are important features of instruction. Sometimes—but by no means always—teachers and students work in one-on-one conferences, small groups, or participate in whole-class discussions in responding to informal writings or shaping them into highly crafted compositions.

**Objections:**

(a) Invasion of privacy is a possibility in personal writings.

(b) Personal revelations can become topics for class discussion, embarrassing the writer.

(c) Language choice in such writing is potentially offensive.

(d) There may be legal and ethical consequences regarding the confidentiality of material written in journals, or teachers may have an obligation to report apparent revelations of abuse, depression, etc.



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**Rationales:**

(a)-(b) Such writings need not be read aloud or shared with other students; often, the teacher is the first (or only) reader. Sound professional judgment will dictate when the student is expected to share and discuss writings.

(c) Considerable latitude in language choice is often given in personal writing. The teacher can confer with the student when coarse language appears to be used for "shock value," and the student can be encouraged to exercise thoughtful control over language choices. Later drafts of informal writings can include more critical decisions about what language is appropriate for the evolving text.

(d) This occurs in rare cases, and it raises some complex points. Some teachers take precautions by setting limits on what may be written in journals. Others set no limits but announce clearly that they will be obliged to report threats, statements about felonies, and other serious problems revealed in journals. Still others permit students to mark certain sections "Do not read," permitting written expression that is kept utterly private. When revelations such as incest or suicidal or criminal intent appear, it might be legally required or ethically essential to confer with the administration, report the matter to civil authorities, or seek legal counsel.

**Summary:** It is important to communicate to parents and other constituencies that personal writing is a key strategy for helping students to develop their own voices as writers rather than mechanically following set forms. The student's growth as a writer requires fluency, and personal writing is an important means to develop fluid expression of ideas and feelings. The use of journals, free writing, and personal narratives helps to set up a nonthreatening atmosphere that is conducive to positive attitudes toward writing and willingness to develop writing skills.



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### Suggested Readings

Bernabei, Gretchen Shoopman. "What Sixth Graders Learn from the Journal of Bobby G." *English Journal,* September 1992, pp. 78–80.

Burniske, R. W. "Creating Dialogue: Teacher Response to Journal Writing." *English Journal,* April 1994, pp. 84–87.

Hudson, Nancy A. "The Violence of Our Lives: The Journal Writing of Two High School Freshmen." *English Journal,* September 1995, pp. 65–69.

Power, Brenda Miller. "Bearing Walls and Writing Workshops." *Language Arts,* November 1995, pp. 482–488.

Wilson, Allison. "Censorship and the Teaching of Composition." In *Preserving Intellectual Freedom: Fighting Censorship in Our Schools.* Jean E. Brown, ed. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.

## 2. The Teaching and Learning of Oral Expression

Because oral expression is the primary means of communication in a wide range of social contexts, students need varied instruction and extensive practice. Through such practice students develop not only clarity, fluency, and flexibility in exchanging ideas but also self-confidence and leadership skills which will help them now and in their future personal, social, and workplace environments. Active oral communication also develops recognition of and respect for diverse points of view, a key aspect of life in a democratic society. Examples of classroom oral activities include large and small group discussion, reports, debate, role-playing, creative dramatics, performance of dramatic literature, and oral interpretation of literature. (See *Standards for the English Language Arts*, NCTE/IRA, 1996.)

**Objections:**

(a) Personal revelations may become topics of class discussion.

(b) Reflective or introspective techniques such as guided imagery and visualization can lead to brainwashing.



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(c) Discussion of values, morals, and ethics in literature and life can be viewed as an invasion of privacy or as an attack on students' beliefs, or those of their parents.

(d) Improvisation, role-playing, creative dramatics, drama performances, and open discussion involve perspective-taking that can lead to challenging of authority or of students' or parents' beliefs.

(e) Not everyone likes to "perform" in dramatic vehicles such as role-playing, debate, or interpretive reading.

**Rationales:**

(a) It is clearly not the teacher's role to pry intimate revelations from students. Many teachers wisely tell students early on that they should not betray confidences or be uncomfortably self-revealing in class discussion. But it must be acknowledged that there is no guarantee that students will refrain from revealing personal or family information during the course of class discussions. The alternative—forbidding any discussion of individual experiences, current and past events, contemporary issues, literary themes, and other topics that could unintentionally lead to student self-revelation—is not only censorial but wholly inconsistent with the obligation of the English language arts teacher to promote reflection, critical thinking, and language development in all students. Finally, the professional judgment of the teacher is key in moderating class discussion in order to assure that wholesome self-expressoion does not become intimate revelation.

(b) Stimulating reflection, invention, fluency, and imagination is an important part of English language arts instruction. Imaging, visualization, concentration, centering exercises, and metacognition techniques—wrongly labeled by censors as "brainwashing" or part of "new age religions"—are useful methodologies that have a growing research base and an integral role in the teaching of thinking, oral communication, writing, viewing, and literature.

(c) As noted in (a) above, all discussions in some way involve values and the idea of banning discussion is untenable in public schools. Rather, it is the teacher's professional



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responsibility to conduct open discussions in ways that support common decency and respect for others in the exchange of ideas, and to encourage expression of many viewpoints rather than privileging or attacking the beliefs of individuals or groups.

(d) It must be acknowledged that dramatic activities of all kinds put the players "into the skin" of the characters portrayed. This in no way implies that a student automatically accepts the perspectives of the character, any more than reading a short story or participating in open discussion implies acceptance of the author's or discussants' viewpoints. Exposure to multiple viewpoints, including some that challenge authority, is a part of daily life. Good English language arts instruction encourages exploration and expression of many perspectives, helping students to understand life in a pluralistic society, think critically, and accommodate others' views in ways that lead to consensus-building and unity within diversity.

(e) Students participate in varying degrees in forms of dramatic enactment. An able teacher does not thrust the shy student who has "speech fright" into a complex role. Successive moves from simple performance formats to more challenging ones are undertaken to fulfill the responsibility to develop communication skill and self-confidence.

**Summary:** Oral communication is at the center of human conduct and the teaching of English language arts, if not the entire school curriculum (Marzano et al., *Dimensions of Thinking*, ASCD, 1988). The cultivation of this ability can be realized only through guided discussion in large and small groups and through instruction that attends to students' abilities to reflect, imagine, verbalize, and perform flexibly and skillfully. Students must not be arbitrarily silenced. The repertoire of teaching methods for developing oral communication must not be censored because of fears about what might be stated during moderated, democratic discussion in the classroom.

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**Suggested Readings**

Cintorino, Margaret A. "Discovering Their Voices, Valuing Their Words." *English Journal,* October 1994, pp. 33–40.

Edwards, Patricia A. "Creating Sharing Time Conversations: Parents and Teachers Work Together." *Language Arts,* September 1996, pp. 344–349.

Genishi, Celia, A. McCarrier, and N. R. Nussbaum. "Research Currents: Dialogue as a Context for Teaching and Learning." *Language Arts,* February 1988, pp. 182–191.

Phelan, Patricia, ed. *Talking to Learn.* Classroom Practices in Teaching English, Vol. 24. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989.

Kaplan, Ellen W. "The Subversive Element of Play: Using Play, Dream, and the Body in the Classroom." *Journal of the NCTE Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning,* Winter 1995–96, pp. 26–32.

"Speech in the Middle." Themed section of *English Journal,* January 1993, pp. 33–56. Articles by June Bowser, Sue Coty, Karen Shafer, Margo Sorenson, Joseph Tsujimoto.

# 3. The Teaching and Learning of Reading

Reading is a fundamental part of English language arts instruction and has personal, practical, and social value. Students reading short stories, poetry, plays, and novels and writing stories and poems of their own are building towards important lifelong literacy habits and developing an ability to use and understand language and create meaning.

A comprehensive reading program is one in which students—as noted in the *Standards for the English Language Arts* (NCTE/IRA, 1996)—"apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g.,



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sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics)" (p. 3). Research demonstrates that skills taught, practiced, and tested in isolation are not used as consistently or effectively as skills taught when children are actually reading and writing. Effective reading instruction should help young students learn to develop and use knowledge of phonics as well as how to use prior knowledge and context to create meaning. Always, the overriding and pervasive goal is to produce literate individuals who read widely, skillfully, and for varied purposes.

Forming concepts and acquiring competence in reading is easier when children read natural language, not the simplified language of some basal readers or bits and pieces of literature found in many workbook and skill programs.

**Objections:**

(a) Phonics is the only acceptable way to assure that children learn to read; using the whole language approach is not valuable.

(b) Without direct phonics instruction, readers will not be able to sound out letters in words and will not do well on tests.

(c) Not using workbooks deprives the learner of adequate drill and practice.

(d) The language in trade books may be too difficult in comparison to that of basal readers.

**Rationales:**

(a) Whole language instruction does not exclude phonics; phonics is taught in contexts of reading and writing rather than in isolation. By integrating skills such as phonics with the study and practice of reading, writing, viewing, and other classroom experiences, teachers who use whole language *approaches* (there is no *single* "whole language approach"), focus mainly on the student's growth rather than on pre-set skill sequences that are not suited to many learners.

(b) In integrated phonics instruction, students have many guided opportunities to learn letter/sound relationships. Moreover, teachers can track and individualize student progress without the inflexibility and artifice of highly



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structured phonics instruction. In integrated programs children also demonstrate through their writing the ways in which they understand sound-letter relationships. Popular misconceptions notwithstanding, children in whole language classrooms have scored the same or higher on virtually every measure of reading ability, including standardized reading tests with subtests that assess phonics skills. (See *SLATE Starter Sheet,* November 1996, in "Suggested Readings" below.)

(c) Drill and practice is not useful in itself, but only insofar as students apply skills and knowledge in actual situations involving reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Development of students' abilities within such real language contexts is more efficient and productive than the isolated practice and dry-run drills provided in exercise sheets and workbooks.

(d) A wide variety of trade books is available for all ages and abilities. The key factor, though, is not the mere presence of trade books but the teachers' use of effective methods—e.g., engaging students in selection of appropriate books, discussing what is read in meaningful ways (i.e., not merely "comprehension checks") both during and after reading, and instilling both interest and pride in reading among students who see themselves as a community of willing readers.

**Summary:** Stereotypical notions of the teaching of reading as *either* whole language *or* phonics. must be put to rest. As amply demonstrated in research and practice (see the readings below), sound whole language instruction attends carefully to skills such as phonics, word recognition, and spelling. However, it does so without parceling out skills in worksheets or presenting children with basals that contain impoverished language and are bereft of story value. Even so, English language arts teachers can best approach objections to whole language programs by avoiding defensiveness and polarization. The more powerful argument is demonstration of how the goals of reading—including instruction in phonics and other skills—are actually being met in their classrooms.



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**Suggested Readings**

McIntyre, Ellen and P. A. Freppon. "A Comparison of Children's Development of Alphabetic Knowledge in a Skills-Based and a Whole Language Classroom." *Research in the Teaching of English*, December 1994, pp. 391–417.

Mills, Heidi, T. O'Keefe, and D. Stephens. *Looking Closely: Exploring the Role of Phonics in One Whole Language Classroom.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.

Oglan, Gerald R. *Parents, Learning and Whole Language Classrooms.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.

Weaver, Constance, ed. *Reconsidering a Balanced Approach to Reading.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.

*SLATE Starter Sheets.* August 1996 issue—Constance Weaver, Fact Sheets "On the Teaching of Phonics"; "On the Nature of Whole Language Education"; November 1996 issue—Constance Weaver, Fact Sheets "On Myths About Whole Language Education"; "On Phonics in Whole Language Classrooms"; "On Research on Whole Language Education."

## 4. The Teaching and Learning of Literature*

Literature instruction that starts with students' responses to texts adds personal relevance as well as depth and breadth to their understanding of those texts. The student/teacher community of interpreters develops knowledge by talking and writing about their reactions to a wide variety of texts. Through exploration of their own perspectives and those of others, students can better understand themselves and their worlds, even as they cultivate increasingly sophisticated reading skills. Individual, small group, and large group activities are frequently used to elicit responses and then to expand and refine them through various critical and analytical techniques. Literature instruction also provides invaluable vicarious experience, enabling the student to consider questions of value and the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of human beings in different times, places, and cultures.



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**Objections:**

(a) Determining the meaning of the text, not eliciting students' subjective responses, is what is important in the study of literature.

(b) The teacher's authority and the author's intended meanings are lost when group activity and individual response and interpretation are considered.

(c) Developing students' self-understanding is an inappropriate goal for the literature program.

(d) Literary classics—the best that has been thought and written—rather than a wide variety of reading, should constitute the literature curriculum.

(e) The literature program produces embarrassment and humiliation when works or passages containing profanities, racial slurs, and other unacceptable language are read aloud or discussed in class.

**Rationales:**

(a) No single, objective meaning resides in a text. This is especially true of literary texts, which are rich and involving precisely because they often contain layers of meaning and can be variously interpreted. Meaning comes from a negotiation or transaction between readers and texts. It further evolves in social contexts, such as class discussion in which initial reader responses are modified by what the classroom community of interpreters adds. Capricious responses or outright misreadings can be revealed in such discussion, as all negotiation of meaning is regularly referred back to the text.

(b) As suggested above, the teacher and the author are not custodians of *the* single meaning in a text. They, along with all other readers, are co-creators of meaning which evolves through continued exploration and discussion of the texts. The author cannot be aware of the entire range of possible

*This section focuses mainly on certain *methods* and goals in the literature. *Selection* of materials for study and *dealing with challenges* are treated in two NCTE brochures: "Guidelines for Selecting Materials in English Language Arts Programs" and "The Students' Right to Read," respectively.



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meanings in a work, nor of meanings unintentionally conveyed, nor of meanings that will be attached to the text by people in different cultures or in future times. Response instruction does not challenge the teacher's authority to set and enforce the rules for classroom procedures; to set the direction of discussion; to assure that many voices and viewpoints are heard; or to maintain discipline if discussion grows overheated. Moreover, the teacher's authority as an experienced reader and interpreter of literature is respected; but again, the teacher is not the sole competent analyst of the literary work. His/her understanding of the work will evolve through discussion rather than being a given which the students must uncover through trial and error and guesswork.

(c) The study of literature and the other humanities has always been pursued in order to better understand the human condition. If students were expected to approach literature solely as descriptions of plot structures, metrical patterns, author's skills and devices, and manifestations of historical movements, literature study would be drained of its power to provide insight into ourselves and the worlds in which we live.

(d) A wide variety of student interests and abilities necessitates a wide variety of readings in addition to thoughtfully selected common readings. In order to grow as readers, students must be provided with works that will engage them in their present stage of development and move them towards ever richer literary experiences. For some, the classics are the right choice early on. For many others, the doorway to deep literacy will be entered initially through good writings that are not in the classical canon. Research shows that students who read willingly and extensively not only gravitate toward but become capable of interpreting more complex texts over time.

(e) It is important to acknowledge that reading aloud profanities such as "damn," "bastard," and "crap," can be embarrassing to some students, especially in earlier grades. Racial and ethnic slurs such as "nigger" and "kike" may also result in profound humiliation when read aloud, even



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if their use within a literary work is part of a well-crafted narrative or realistic dialogue. The impact of hearing the words read aloud is different from seeing them on the printed page. Consequently, many teachers do not permit verbalization of such language. On the other hand, it is often quite useful to talk *about* "offensive language" that appears in literary works. It may be important to ask, for example, whether the author uses such language for sensationalistic effect or in an exaggerated manner rather than as a realistic portrayal of the characters' way of talking. Students might also be asked if their response was one of surprise or shock when they read the words in the context of the narrative. Certainly the presence of such language in itself does not justify the banning or defacing of a book, as would-be censors sometimes demand. It must be considered within the context of the author's craft and broader moral vision.

**Summary:** Response-based instruction is important because it merges respect for the student's ideas and feelings with important concerns about the text, the author, and the historical and cultural milieu of the work. Literacy development is enhanced when the classroom is a nonthreatening environment in which individual responses can be advanced as hypotheses rather than as attempts at guessing the "right" interpretation. In response approaches, the student's readiness and willingness to enter imaginatively into a literary work receives attention, diminishing the likelihood that all works studied will be a packaged set, irrespective of the interests and current development of the student as a reader. Again, the goal is to always advance students towards increasingly complex and richer literature, taking care along the way to assure that active engagement is considered.

## Suggested Readings

*ALAN Review*, Journal of the Adolescent Literature Assembly, NCTE, published three times per year.

McClure, Amy A. and J. V. Kristo, eds. *Inviting Children's Responses to Literature*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.

Oliver, Eileen Iscoff. *Crossing the Mainstream: Multicultural Perspectives in Teaching Literature*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.

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Rosenblatt, Louise M. *Literature as Exploration*. 5th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995.

Self, Warren P. "Adolescent Literature: Making Connections with Teens." *Virginia English Bulletin*, Fall 1994.

## 5. The Teaching of Grammar, Spelling, Mechanics, and Usage

According to available research in the teaching of various aspects of language, *isolated* teaching of skills cannot be justified. Separate elements are useful only in supporting larger processes such as communication and comprehension. For example, spelling and vocabulary are learned best in context, and sentence building is more effective than analysis or labeling of sentences already built.

**Objections:**

(a) Teachers have abandoned important fundamentals of grammar such as the parts of speech, sentence diagramming, and drills in subject-verb agreement.

(b) Usage is being taught as situational rather than fixed.

(c) The perceived decline in usage standards is attributed to poor instructional strategies used by teachers.

(d) When Standard English is not extolled as the ideal model, basic communication is hindered.

**Rationales:**

(a) Decades of research and practice have shown that teaching of grammar in isolation does not improve composition skills, nor does it help students to acquire Standard English usage. However, approaching grammar instruction in relation to actual speaking and writing situations can be beneficial.

(b) Speakers appropriately adjust their language choices to the situations in which they find themselves. This ability to shift styles is a necessary skill adults use daily as they adapt



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language used on the job, in the home, and in other environments.

(c) Students are exposed to many language models both inside and outside of schools. Increases in nonstandard usage, if actual, are likely to be due to peer pressure encouraging nonstandard usage and the influence of TV, movies, or popular music.

(d) Dialect differences in America are not so great as to hinder everyday communication. Regional and social dialects have their own coherent structures, generated to meet the needs of the culture they serve. The insistence that Standard English—which is itself an evolving, dynamic form—is the sole acceptable dialect in all situations can be seen as a way of reinforcing class differences and prejudices against minorities.

**Summary:** Teachers of English language arts continue to support Standard English as the language of wider communication. Their methods focus on teaching grammar, usage, and mechanics in ways that actually affect student performance in speaking and writing rather than on teaching rules and definitions apart from communication contexts. The acknowledgment that various language styles and dialect variations are valid in different cultural contexts is soundly rooted in linguistic theory and research. Moreover, this insight enables teachers to move all students towards knowledge and use of Standard English without denigrating the language they hear and appropriately use in various environments.

## Suggested Readings

"Hearing Every Voice," Language Strand section of *Voices in English Classrooms: Honoring Diversity and Change*, Lenora Cook and H. C. Lodge, eds. Classroom Practices in Teaching English, Vol. 28. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996.

Hillocks, George. *Research on Written Composition.* (Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and National Conference on Research in English, 1986).

Laminack, Lester L. and K. Wood. *Spelling in Use.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996.

Noguchi, Rei R. *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991.



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*SLATE Starter Sheet*, April 1996. Constance Weaver, SLATE Fact Sheets "On Teaching Skills in Context"; "On the Teaching of Spelling"; "On the Teaching of Grammar."

"Students Right to Their Own Language." *College Composition and Communication*, Fall 1974.

## 6. The Teaching and Learning of Nonprint Media

The study and use of nonprint media in English language arts classrooms have become more and more crucial in this age of increasing technology and the powerful influence of ubiquitous media images in our lives. (See *Standards for the English Language Arts*, NCTE/IRA, 1996, pp. 27–30; 39–41.) Media study can and should involve analyses of nonprint texts—e.g., films (usually on videocassette), TV commercials, newscasts and other programs, songs (from medieval ballads to popular music featured on MTV)—on their own. But print and nonprint texts do not necessarily compete with one another as much as they complement one another, allowing students to explore more deeply the issues and themes revealed. This comparative approach typically entails the development and refinement of critical thinking skills. Media study and use are also critical in appealing to multiple intelligences of visual and auditory learners; and whether studying or creating nonprint media products, all students expand their knowledge of and command over communication processes through contact with such media.

**Objections:**

(a) Objections have been raised to controversial content, especially in films and TV programs—explicit language, nudity, sexuality, violence, controversial themes, relationships, and negative or stereotypical representations of race, gender, and sexual preference.

(b) Media study and use are "frills" that are of questionable academic and artistic value.



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(c) Students already have plenty of exposure to media outside of school and are all too easily influenced by the power of visual images.

(d) Students won't have to read if they are watching or tinkering with media; the school must nurture reading and writing.

**Rationales:**

(a) Controversies over content of nonprint media are parallel to, though not identical with, those in book protests. They can be handled in a pedagogically sound manner with the proper previewing and analytical activities that accompany viewing and study. (See NCTE's "Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint Media," 1993, and "Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs," 1996.)

(b) Media in the classroom will lack substance only when studied or used in educationally unsound ways—e.g., showing a film or using software without instructional motivation but as a time-filler. Print materials, of course, are subject to the same kinds of abuse. Both must be an integral part of well-planned instruction.

(c) The ubiquity and influence of media are powerful reasons *for* serious study of media. The more students know how media messages are constructed, the more they will be able to control the influence those images have on them.

(d) We need not force a polarization by thinking of print *versus* nonprint media; they often appear in combination. Moreover, visual literacy can strengthen print literacy by sharpening critical analysis skills, stimulating interest in print texts, and opening students to a deep understanding of relationships among technologies and symbol systems.

**Summary:** The study and use of nonprint media, like literature, can promote both personal and cultural expression and allow students to experience cultures and gain information beyond their immediate spheres and resources. The study of nonprint media can parallel the study of literature, but forms such as film and video



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must be examined and produced as unique art forms that command their own textual and analytical languages. Nonprint media have been undervalued due mainly to their relatively brief history of development and association with popular culture. Undeniably, media images are powerful and influential in our culture. Students who lack the tools to critique and work with nonprint media will be unprepared to live thoughtfully and productively in the present and the future.

### Suggested Readings


Costanzo, William. *Reading the Movies: Twelve Great Films on Video and How to Teach Them.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.

Fox, Roy. "Kids and Advertising." *SLATE Starter Sheet,* August 1997.

Power, Brenda Miller, J. D. Wilhelm, and K. Chandler, eds. *Reading Stephen King: Issues of Censorship, Student Choice, and Popular Culture.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.

Smagorinsky, Peter. *Expressions: Multiple Intelligences in the English Class.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991.

Suhor, Charles. "Books and the New Technologies." *Consensus and Dissent: Teaching English Past, Present, and Future.* 1986 Yearbook of the National Council of Teachers of English. Marjorie Farmer, ed. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.


## 7. Collaborative/Cooperative Learning in the English Language Arts Program

Collaborative/cooperative learning is an instructional method which takes advantage of the dynamics and the diversity of small group work in achieving educational goals. While some collaborative learning is highly structured, in English language arts classrooms collaborative groups often work towards clear goals without assignment of fixed roles for each student.

Cooperative learning can be used for numerous purposes—e.g., to generate ideas for writing, to respond to themes and ideas in print or nonprint texts, to explore or apply concepts from teacher




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or student presentations, to provide more opportunities for all students to participate in discussions, and to use authentic peer audiences for feedback on student writing. In addition, collaborative projects expose students to varied approaches and points of view while students are learning to work with others.

Research demonstrates that collaborative/cooperative learning is an effective method. When students discuss key concepts to each other, when they apply learned principles to collaborative projects, when they use clear criteria to evaluate each other's work, they come to a better understanding of those concepts and principles, and of the criteria themselves. Students engaged in cooperative learning gain essential social skills as well. They learn the give-and-take of group interaction that is important in the world of work and in our democratic society at large. As they communicate with students from varied backgrounds, they acquire understanding that eliminates prejudices. Finally, all students benefit from the opportunities that cooperative learning provides for the exchange of ideas with their peers.

**Objections:**

(a) Removing the teacher from the front and center of the learning process makes cooperative learning unstructured and undisciplined.

(b) Brighter students are exploited to teach the less bright.

(c) Students are not qualified to evaluate each other's work.

(d) Assessment practices that include group grades are unfair to individuals.

**Rationales:**

(a) The teacher is not removed in cooperative learning but rather models key tasks, establishes goals and ground rules, emphasizes democratic participation and civil behaviors, and monitors groups to assure that they remain on task.

(b) Bright students learn material more thoroughly and in new ways when they communicate it to others.

(c) Peer evaluation processes such as peer-editing give student writers more varied responses to their writing, especially in early draft stages. Moreover, peer evaluation often involves



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application of important criteria for improvement. As students learn to apply these criteria to others' writing, they internalize the criteria and apply them to their own writing.

(d) Individual grading for student performance in various aspects of English language arts, not group grading, is the mainstay of assessment. However, assigning group grades for some collaborative projects encourages full participation and reinforces the cooperative nature of the activity.

**Suggested Readings**

"Collaborative Writing: What the Students Say." *EJ* Exchange Section of *English Journal*, January 1994, pp. 59–74. Articles by Elizabeth Blackburn Blockman, Mary Koszyca and Angela Krueger, Helen Dale, and Romana Hillebrand.

Condon, Mark, F. Condon, and J. A. Clyde. "Co-Authoring: Composing through Conversation." *Language Arts*, December 1996, pp. 587–596.

Fox, Dana. "Collaborative Learning and Teaching Writing." *SLATE Starter Sheet*, March 1993.

Freedman, Ruth Ann. "The Mr. and Mrs. Club: The Value of Collaboration in Writers' Workshop." *Language Arts*, February 1995, pp. 97–104.

Golub, Jeffrey N. *Focus on Collaborative Learning*. Classroom Practices in Teaching English series. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1988.

Raines, Peggy A. "Writing Portfolios: Turning a House Into a Home." *English Journal*, January 1996, pp. 41–45.



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If you are faced with a challenge to instructional methods or materials, call 1-800-NCTE for advice and assistance. To receive free copies of the brochures "Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs" and "The Students' Right to Read," send a business-sized self-addressed stamped envelope to NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. To support NCTE's battle against censorship and to keep apprised of censorship matters, send a check or money order for $15 to SLATE at the aforementioned NCTE address; you will receive three SLATE Newsletters and three SLATE Starter Sheets per year.

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